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Apprentice & Master: Prints and Sculpture by Charles Wells and Leonard Baskin

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Madeline Viljoen

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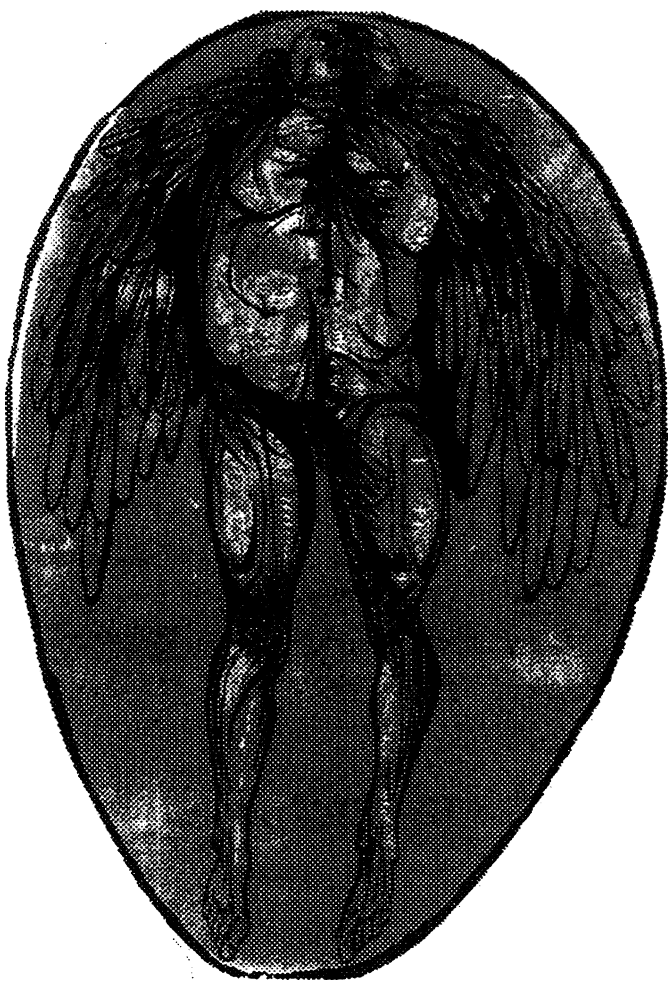
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APPRENTICE & MASTER

**Prints and Sculpture by
Charles Wells & Leonard Baskin**

**La Salle Art Museum
Spring 2004**



Baskin, *Icarus*

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Leonard Baskin (1922-2000), American

Leonard Baskin worked as a sculptor, illustrator and printmaker. He studied at the New York University School of Architecture and Allied Arts (1939-41), the School of Fine Art (1941-3), the New School for Social Research (1949), as well as at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris (1950) and the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Florence (1951). His work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Japanese National Museum in Tokyo and the Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna, and he has won countless awards throughout his career, such as the Special Medal of Merit from the American Institute of Graphic Art in 1965 and the Skowhegan Gold Medal for Graphics in 1973.

Baskin was a traditionalist whose ideas about art ran counter to prevailing trends in modern art, including pop, abstraction, photo-realism and neo-realism. "Photo-realism and minimal abstraction," he said, "are unwilling to say anything about reality, about their involvement with reality..." Despite his opposition to other forms of realism, Baskin described his own work as realist, by which

he meant the capacity of his art to communicate enduring values and to penetrate beneath surface appearances to the eternal truths of human existence. Baskin's realism is reflected not only in his choice of subject matter, which includes allegorical themes and subjects from the Old Testament, mythology, literature, drama and poetry, but also in his choice of medium. His prints, which are filled with a complex web of lines and which involve deep cutting of the print surface, can be seen as metaphorically imitating his effort to dig to the bottom of things. The making of sculpture, which often involves hard physical labor and which he believed connected him with the common man, likewise reflect the artist's commitment to a realist art.

Though Baskin considered himself primarily a sculptor by profession, it was as a printmaker and bookmaker that he first received recognition. Baskin's love of books was nurtured from a young age in his parent's home and continued throughout his life. While he was studying at Yale University, he founded a private press, which he named Gehenna, after a line from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "And black Gehenna called, the type of Hell." Baskin's press became

famous for the quality of its design and illustrations and only declined in the 1970s, when the demand for finely produced volumes fell off. It was restarted on a smaller scale in the 1990s.

Man and nature are the principal subjects of both his sculpture and his prints. In terms of the human figure, though, none perhaps features as prominently as that of the artist himself. Not only did he repeatedly make self-portraits of himself throughout his life, but, uncannily, many of his male figures resemble Baskin himself. In some cases, such as those involving Old Testament figures, such identification is perhaps not surprising. As the son of a rabbi, Baskin's Jewish identity was an important aspect of his art production throughout his career.

Another recurring motif in Baskin's art is the bird and its hybrid, the birdman. For Baskin, birds, especially the owl, crow and eagle, were associated with viciousness and its obverse, victimization. "Birds of prey", he writes, " flutter ominously through my oeuvre. Their essential meaning in my work is as raptors, carrion devourers, and as swift and startling bolts of death." The winged creatures that appear in Baskin's works are by no means all associated with evil, however.

Subjects like *Tobias and the Angel* and *Icarus* permit the artist instead to consider questions such as the nature of divine guidance and the limits of human invention. Baskin's depictions of nature were, likewise, not always simply images of bounty, but also of death and dread. A frequent motif in his art, the thistle, for example, with its heavy headed flower and its thick tangle of thorny leaves, could be both striking and suggestive of pain and suffering.

As an artist, Baskin felt an enormous debt to the Pantheon of great artists and writers, many of whom he memorialized in print. His advice to students was to study the works of both contemporary and past masters, stating: "Young artists must seek in the masters, in Rembrandt, in Goya, in Daumier, and in the masters of the present, in Orozco, in the Picasso of *Guernica*, in Kollwitz, for inspiration and guidance." His own debt to the art of the past is perhaps clearest in his sculptures, which look to Renaissance examples by fifteenth-century Italian artists such as Ghiberti and Donatello for lessons about relief, perspective and modeling.

Though he disagreed with a number of his teachers, when he encountered the sculptor Maurice Glickman, with whom he felt a close bond, he became closely attached to him and worked as his studio assistant for two years. This experience shaped Baskin's own views on pedagogy and he is quoted as having said: "The best way to learn about art is to attach yourself to an artist. You've to be in his studio, in his hair, bothering him all the time." Charles Wells, the other artist featured in this exhibition entered into such a relationship with Baskin, whom he assisted in his shop for several years. Baskin's influence on Wells is apparent in numerous ways.

Madeleine Viljoen
Assistant Curator

Charles Wells (b. 1935 —), American

Charles Wells, a Quaker artist, is a sculptor of wood and marble as well as an etcher of complex mixed intaglio prints. Several years after graduating from Amherst College, he received his first and only essential art instruction with an apprenticeship to Leonard Baskin from 1961 to 1964. In place of study in a traditional art school, Wells chose to learn directly from a master artist, according to the apprenticeship system established in medieval times. While that arrangement involved much hard work in assisting the master artist (such as the preparation of artistic materials), Wells had time in return to learn and practice his art with the advantage of one-on-one guidance and instruction from the master. As a result of his artistic achievement during these apprenticeship years he won the prestigious *Prix de Rome*, which granted him a Fellowship to study at the American Academy in Rome from 1964 to 1966. After three years in California and Vermont, Wells returned to Italy, living in the "marble" town of Pietrasanta until 1976.

Since then, Wells has lived, and quietly but steadily practiced his art, on the old family farm in Washington Crossing, Bucks County. Here he has a large studio in the barn for carving his sculptures (often using wood from his property), and several studios in the house for drawing and printmaking. Over the years, he has had numerous solo and group exhibitions both in the United States and Europe and is well represented in private and public collections, such as the National Portrait Gallery and Whitney Museums. Moreover, he has won many notable awards including, most recently, the Daniel Chester French Model for Sculpture, National Academy of Design, 2003.

Like his master Baskin, Wells became fascinated with rendering portraits of past heroes. With a deep knowledge of their work and with insight into their character from his own voluminous reading, Wells renders in prints compelling faces of artists, musical composers, authors, and great leaders in history such as Gandhi and Frederick Douglass. As seen in examples here, each image has an intensely complex web of lines, variously textured surfaces, dramatic tonal effects, and contrasts of light and dark. Though etching is Wells's basic medium, his

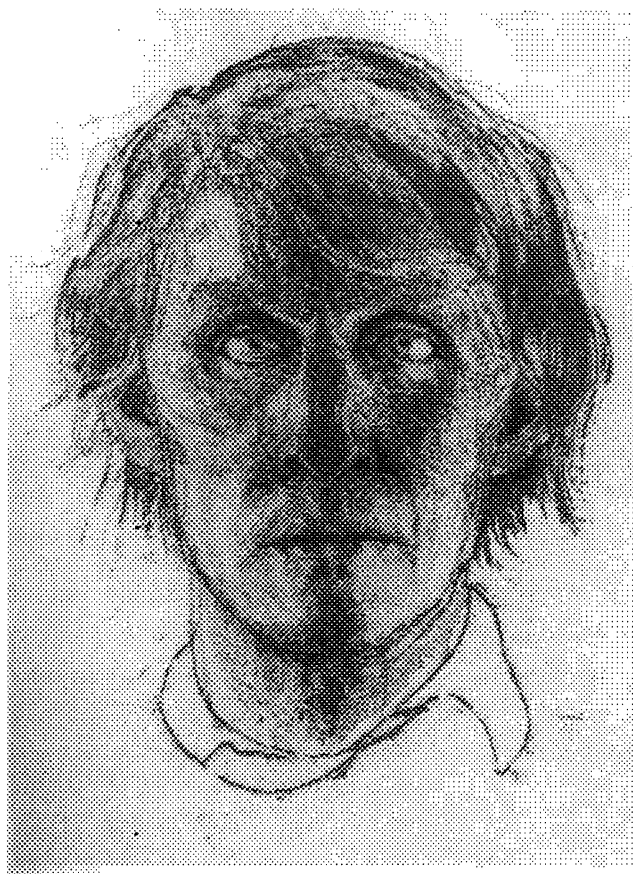
mixed media prints involve much additional handwork, with the use of multiple burins to achieve various engraved, textured lines. In addition, Wells often wipes, grinds, scrapes, and burnishes the metal plate for tonal effects. As with Baskin, the result is a portrait, often asymmetrical, which bears not only an outward resemblance but also strong suggestions of the spirit and mystery that lie deeply embedded within the soul.

But while Baskin usually relies on sharp contrasts of black and white lines and patterns, especially noticeable in his woodcuts and wood engravings, to present his figures, Wells' compositions are defined with complex gradations of black and white tones and sinuous thin lines, which cover the entire surface. Unlike Baskin, Wells often re-works or changes the image, creating numerous states or proofs before printing the final plate. Though much of the subject matter in Wells' other prints (see *Excavation* in exhibition) or sculptures remains enigmatic, like Baskin's works it is often tied to some spiritual or universal theme, such as man as victim or the pathos and suffering in life.

Thus, while there are a number of influences of the master on the apprentice with regard to medium, subject matter, and

the use of line, to produce a vivid and penetrating vision, one can see that Wells' style stands emphatically apart from that of Baskin's.

Caroline Wistar
Curator



Checklist

We are deeply indebted to several generous collectors for loans and general support for the present exhibition. Their loans are indicated in the listing of works here by asterisks: one for works from Maestro Marc Mostovoy, and two** for works from artist Charles Wells.*

1) Leonard Baskin

Self-Portrait at age 42, 1962

Color woodcut *

The artist pictures himself as a kind of workingman, with a grizzled beard, a cap on his head, and his left eye partially obscured by shadow. Inscribed in the top corner are the letters "AET", a Latin abbreviation for "aetas," meaning age: the artist at the age of 42. While the artist's appearance may seem uncouth, his inclusion of the abbreviation expresses his knowledge not only of Latin, but also of Renaissance pictorial conventions, which frequently made use of these letters to inform the viewer of the age of the sitter. The type of color woodcut he uses—known as a chiaroscuro woodcut—can likewise be traced back to the Renaissance, where artists first began to experiment with the use of color in prints. Baskin's print is nothing if not sophisticated!

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)
- 2) Charles Wells
Man in a Mirror: Self-Portrait
Mixed Intaglio
Ed. 53/77 **
 - 3) Leonard Baskin
Rembrandt, 1964
Etching
Ed. 50*
 - 4) Charles Wells
Rembrandt
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 58/77 **
Inscribed, l.l.:R.v.R. for L.B.
(Rembrandt van Rijn for Leonard Baskin) *

This image reveals Wells' reverence
for master artists of the past including
Baskin.

-)
)
- 5) Charles Wells
Albān Berg, 1966
Etching
 - 6) Leonard Baskin
Thomas Eakins
Woodcut
Artist's proof

- 7) Charles Wells
Hart Crane
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 57/77
- 8) Charles Wells
Excavation
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 45/77
- 9) Charles Wells
Childhood of a Leader
Etching

This print portrays Hitler as a young child.

- 10) Charles Wells
Copper Beech, 1963
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 37/77 **

- 11) Leonard Baskin
Flea, 1951
Linoleum cut*

One of the earliest prints included in the exhibition, this print reflects the artist's love of nature. It formed part of a series of illustrations for a book of animals both great and small entitled, *A Little Book of Natural History*.

- 12) Leonard Baskin
Steel Plate for *Winter Bouquet*, 1964*
- 13) Leonard Baskin
Winter Bouquet, 1964
Etching
Ed. 100*
- 14) Leonard Baskin
Death Among the Thistles, 1959
Wood engraving
Unlimited edition*
- 15) Leonard Baskin
Dog in the Meadow, 1964
Etching
Ed. 100*
- 16) Leonard Baskin
Birdman, 1969
Etching*

The combination of a bird's head with the stocky nude physique of a man is fear inspiring, expressive of what Baskin described as the predatory natures of both man and bird to create an idea of "total predaciousness."

17) Leonard Baskin
Woodblock for *Owl**

18) Leonard Baskin
Owl
Ed. 65*

Baskin conveys the ominous nature of his birds in various ways. The *Owl*, which for Baskin ambiguously represented both wisdom and tyranny, has extremely large feet and long talons, and it is impossible to see the bird's eyes, which are rendered as pitch-black voids.

19) Leonard Baskin
Tobias and the Angel, 1958
Wood engraving
Ed. 300

20) Leonard Baskin
Eggmother from the Sybil Portfolio
Illustration for a Book of
Poems by Ruth Fainlight (Gehenna
Press, 1991)
Color Woodcut
Ed. VIII/XX
Purchased with funds donated by the Art Angels.

*Works in Hallway and
Hallway Glass Cases*

21) Leonard Baskin

Icarus, 1967

Color woodcut

Ed. 100*

22) Leonard Baskin

a) *St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, 1983

Bronze relief

b) Leonard Baskin

St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle, 1983

Plaster cast for bronze relief

Commisioned with funds donated by Curtis Bok

23) Dante Alighieri

The Divine Comedy,

Translated by Thomas G. Bergin and

Illustrated by Leonard Baskin, New York, 1969

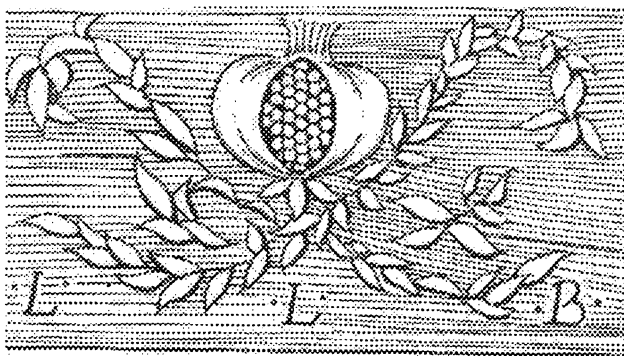
Vols. I and III

Signed by Leonard Baskin

Ed. 100

- 24) Leonard Baskin
Thomas Eakins, 1972
Silver medal to commemorate the
restoration of the houses and studio of
Thomas Eakins.
- 25) Leonard Baskin
Miniature Natural History,
New York, 1983
Volumes II, III, IV
- 26) Leonard Baskin
a) *Apollo*, 1969
b) *Athena's Shield*, 1969
c) *Icarus*, 1969
Series of three bronze plaques*
Ed. 136/250
- 27) Leonard Baskin
Hosie's Aviary, New York, 1979
- 28) Charles Wells
Woman's Face
Bronze**

- 29) Charles Wells
Tribute to Francesco Laurana
Bronze**
- 30) Charles Wells
Circular Plaque of a
Woman's Face
Bronze**
- 31) Charles Wells
Diana
Alabaster
- 32) Charles Wells
Dorothy Day, 1996
Red Oak Relief
Commissioned by Dennis and Judy O'Brien
On the occasion of Brother Daniel Burke's
Fiftieth Anniversary as a Christian Brother.



Twentieth Century Gallery

- 33) Leonard Baskin
Our General, 1967
Etching
- 34) Leonard Baskin
Walt Whitman, 1955
Wood engraving
Ed. 250
- 35) Leonard Baskin
Self-Portrait as a Priest, 1952
Artist's proof
Woodcut
- 36) Leonard Baskin
Dead Saint
Woodcut
Ed. 50
Given by Father Thomas Loughrey
- 37) Leonard Baskin
Amos, 1960
Woodcut*

38) Leonard Baskin

Betrayal, 1969

Woodcut*

Only rarely does Baskin treat the female figure, as in the case of allegorical figure of *Betrayal*. Apart from her heavy breasts, however, the figure seems virtually sexless. The artist seems more interested in conveying the pathos of the figure than anything about her gender. Even here, arguably, the woman's figure is based on that of Baskin himself.

39) Charles Wells

Dennis O'Brien

Study in graphite for oil portrait

Lent by Dennis O'Brien

40) Charles Wells

Jean Baptiste de La Salle

Mixed intaglio

Ed. 1/40

41) Charles Wells

Georg Philipp Telemann

Mixed intaglio

Ed. 25/77 **

- 42) Charles Wells
Dorothy Day, 1997
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 7/100
Purchased with funds provided by Col. and Mrs.
David Souser
- 43) Charles Wells
Dorothy Day, 1997
Mixed intaglio
Working proof
Given by the artist
- 44) Charles Wells
Gandhi
Mixed intaglio
Ed. 35/77 **
- 45) Charles Wells
Walt Whitman, 1975
Mixed Intaglio
Ed. 55/77
- 46) Charles Wells
Frederick Douglass
Mixed intaglio
Given by Dennis O'Brien